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ABSTRACT

Today's society is so bound by the conventions of print-based culture that it is almost impossible to recreate the spirit of the highly dynamic, ancient art form of rhetoric. Rhetoric's origins lie in the art of oral rhapsodic composing that involved a complex set of interrelated mental and linguistic patterns. Most contemporary scholars of composition have discussed ancient rhetoric exclusively in terms of producing written texts. However, the most important aspect of rhetoric was its oral performative nature. This discovery can inform and enrich the art of contemporary textual composition. As numerous critics have argued, the consciousness of a culture is largely shaped by its media, and in ancient Greece, this medium was the spoken language. A dramatic tension existed between spoken and written language. The various parts of rhetoric, such as ethos, pathos, style, delivery, and so on, were conceived of as entirely a part of the performative matrix. For today's classroom, an ongoing interaction between the individual engaged in the composing process and the emergent text is similar to the connection between performance and text in ancient rhetoric. As at various times throughout the history of rhetoric, today's society is a culture complicated by the interaction of distinctive media, and in this context, writing instructors may be ready for a revival and reassessment of ancient rhetoric as a performative art that is oral, textual, and visual all at once. (HB)

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# "Declassicizing" Ancient Rhetoric: Toward a Reconstructed Rhetoric of Oral Performance

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# "Declassicizing" Ancient Rhetoric: Toward a Reconstructed Rhetoric of Oral Performance

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Whenever I open my copy of Edward Corbett's *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*, the first thing I notice is the detailed chart concerning "Discovery of Arguments," "Arrangement of Material," "Style," etc. The chart itself, like the rest of Corbett's book, is actually quite useful. Yet despite its utility, it reminds me of how far such a textbook, in its form and function, has strayed from the world of ancient rhetoric that it seeks to recreate for the "modern student." A *chart*--can we imagine Cicero before the Roman Senate with a chart? Can we imagine the Athenian forum or public assemblies using such print-based visual aids?

This may seem a petty complaint, but it reveals a perennial problem with our assumptions about what we call "classical" rhetoric--we are so bound by the conventions of print-based culture that we find it almost impossible to recreate the spirit of this highly dynamic ancient art form (cf. Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, pp. 117-138).[1] Lists, charts, graphs, appendices, indexes, and all the other varieties of textual apparatus are second nature to us after centuries of approaching rhetoric through textbooks. But is that really what constitutes the ancient rhetorical arts, either in their theory or their practice? I would say no--all the handbooks, lists, and taxonomies, that have served so long as guides to rhetorical performance, have gradually robbed us of the spirit of that

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ancient art. We have reproduced texts about the art, but not the art itself. And we have, generation by generation since the Renaissance and the development of print, moved further away from the origins of rhetoric--origins that lie in the art of oral rhapsodic composing that involved a complex set of interrelated mental and linguistic patterns. Instead, we have substituted a "textbook" rhetoric, which categorizes, classifies, and "classicizes" these patterns into forms and formats that can be easily presented in a printed schoolbook, and easily reduced to charts and lists.

It is this "schoolbook" tradition of rhetoric which C. H. Knoblauch and Lil Brannon so passionately and eloquently attack in *Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing* (cf. especially, chap. 2, pp. 22-50). Unlike Corbett, they can find no reason to bring "classical" rhetoric to the modern student, referring to it as "that old-time religion." And it is with a quasi-religious fervor that they mount their attack. In order to do so, it is necessary for them to see the ancient world in rather monolithic terms--a context where thought and language are essentially separate, and where the complex and subtle relationships between knowledge and discourse are beyond the scope of the ancient rhetoricians.

Ironically, it was the ancient rhetoricians who preferred a rather indeterminate relationship between thought and expression, leading to the Socratic/Platonic attack on rhetoric in works such as *Gorgias* (Kennedy, pp. 45-52). Knoblauch and Brannon critique a "classical"

epistemology that seems to separate knowledge and discourse (p. 23). But while such epistemological assumptions reflect the ancient philosophical tradition, they were not fully accepted by the practicing rhetoricians (the sophists), and thus began the long-standing conflict between philosophy, so dependent on dialectic analysis, and rhetoric, so intricately involved with linguistic performance.

Knoblauch and Brannon really have more of an argument with the philosophical assumptions of the Enlightenment world than with the ancient one. Treating language as container is a tradition founded more in the work of John Locke and George Campbell than in the spirit of the ancient Greek sophists (Kennedy, pp.227-28, 232-34).

But if Knoblauch and Brannon conflate all rhetorical traditions prior to the modern into one convenient compendium, they are hardly to be singled out for blame. After all, since the Renaissance, textbook after textbook has attempted to paint a similar picture of "classical" rhetoric--a picture carefully selected, edited, and limited to fit the spatial confines and presentational techniques of the schoolroom and the textbook. For generations, we have accepted a category called "classical rhetoric," dominated by authorities such as Aristotle, Cicero, and Quintilian, and supposedly consistent with the philosophical assumptions of Aristotelian thought. But we need to reach beyond this limited perspective before we can even begin to understand the complexities of ancient rhetoric in its own cultural context, and evaluate its potential usefulness in contemporary composition.

We can start by forgetting the charts, and by attempting to suspend the culturally reinforced assumptions of a print-based world. Instead, we can consider what was unique about the rhetoric practiced in the ancient world, and what may be very different from our own immediate assumptions as teachers of composition. Most contemporary scholars of composition who have attempted to discuss ancient rhetoric, whether to "bury it" or to "praise it," have thought of it exclusively in terms of producing written texts. However, the single most important aspect of ancient rhetoric was its oral performative nature--ancient rhetoric was an art of oral performance, even before it was derided by Plato or described by Aristotle. So it is as an art of oral performance that we must reconsider that ancient rhetoric, and thus, we may discover new ways that it can inform and enrich the art of contemporary textual composition.

We can begin our reconsideration by asking some fundamental questions. What were the origins of ancient Greek rhetoric and how did it develop into the art that has been so influential in Western culture, yet so misunderstood in recent centuries? Of course, answering these questions in depth presents us with a rather demanding task, and here I will provide merely a preliminary exploration of what might later become a more comprehensive study.

However, prior to attempting any answers, we should examine our assumptions about discourse and communication. It may seem obvious to us that ancient Greek rhetoric was an art of "communication," but that

word carries with it a great deal of cultural baggage. It cannot be uttered without an image of wires, tubes, or circuit boards haunting the backs of our minds. We think in terms of the technology-intensive communication systems of our contemporary world. We do so with such unconscious dependence on systematic and mechanistic imagery that even in intimate, interpersonal discussions we are likely to say "I'd like some feedback from you on this?" Even prior to this past century of electronic communication, our culture had already been shaped by the technology of print for several hundred years before that. For us, "communication" seems inseparable from the various techniques and technologies of "mass communication." Thus, it is not without some effort of imagination that we can reconstruct the art of oral performance from which our culture originally derived what we call "classical" rhetoric.

As the work of Eric Havelock, Walter Ong, and several others has demonstrated in great detail, the consciousness of a culture and that of its individual members, along with their means of communication, is largely shaped by their media.[2] In the case of our own culture, a rich mixture of media has given us a complex and often confusing array of rhetorical possibilities. In ancient Greek culture, the principal medium of communication was spoken language, and prior to the development of the Greek alphabet, speech was really the only medium. As Havelock and Ong have both noted, reconstructing that culture of primary orality is a speculative exercise at best, even given the potential parallels studied

by linguists and anthropologists working with those primary oral cultures still in existence earlier in this century (e.g. the studies of Alfred Lord and Milman Parry so foundational to contemporary re-interpretations of Homeric poetry; these studies are frequently cited by Havelock and Ong).

Still, we have learned enough to begin reconstructing the cultural context in which the spoken and written word first began their dialogue. Havelock has suggested that despite earlier assumptions, writing came relatively late to Greek culture, as late as the mid seventh century B.C. (*The Muse Learns to Write*, pp. 79-85). In addition, once literacy began to develop, it encountered great resistance in what was still essentially an oral culture:

> The alphabet was an interloper, lacking social standing and achieved use. The elite of society were all reciters and performers. . . . The organized teaching of letters in primary school is not likely to have occurred in Athens until the last third of the fifth century B.C. and is first attested by Plato in the early fourth. (87)

Thus, for several centuries, a dramatic tension existed between the spoken and written word in ancient Greece. It was during this time that the art of oral performance was first examined by means outside itself--i.e. it could be described in writing, and its processes and procedures subjected to the kind of analysis possible in written texts. Yet, at the same time, oral performance continued to be a standard practice, and its

form and function, though examined in writing, were still inexorably linked to the contexts of orality.

It was in these dynamic, complicated circumstances that rhetoric was first formally studied as an art, and its practitioners first taught it as an organized study. These early "sophistic" rhetoricians of the fifth century B.C., the subjects of such scorn from Plato, receive relatively little attention in approaches to classical rhetoric that use essentially an "Aristotle-Cicero-Quintilian" trinity. As George Kennedy points out, it was the sophistic rhetoricians that continued an older tradition of apprenticeship-like instruction, even as the first "technical handbooks" began to be produced in fifth-century Athens (p. 25). Throughout this period, both the technical, textbook instruction and the traditions of oral performance schooling co-existed in a vigorous cultural "dialogue," and it was in this very tension and self-consciousness produced by competing approaches and distinctive media (both oral and written) that rhetoric as an art was first really practiced and studied.[3]

If theorists such as Havelock and Ong are accurate in their assumptions, ancient rhetorical performance probably bore little resemblance to the carefully stratified series of parts that we see in so many textbook descriptions. "Forensic," "deliberative," and "epideictic" were not barren categories but genuine cultural and social settings which called for rhetorical performance to satisfy the legal, political, and social needs of a particular discourse community. And such elements as "logos," "pathos," and "ethos," were not simply separate parts of a

rhetorical mechanism. Rather, they were probably more like different musical themes carefully orchestrated into the whole performance of the speech in its particular context. Neither speaker nor listener would want to separate each of these themes but would instead seek to present or experience the unified effect created by their interaction. Together, these features of ancient rhetoric formed a matrix from which the rhetor could draw together the disparate aspects of experience into moving discourse.

Likewise, what Isocrates and later rhetoricians came to identify as the "parts" of rhetoric--invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery--which we so often think of as separate "steps" in a necessarily linear process, actually formed another performative matrix. Our emphasis on textuality and linear progression has made us ignore the possibility that these terms actually describe activities that co-exist in the same time. We usually think of a process beginning with invention, moving on to organization, then "clothing" that material in style, thus creating an artifact to be memorized and delivered. But that may not have been the case. The features of an oral culture described by Havelock and Ong suggest that, even though textbooks present these activities as linear, oral performers may have experienced them as interactive. One could very well begin with the familiar or commonplace utterance which would stimulate both memory and invention at once, and the discovery of what is to be said, the arranging of it, and the styling of it could grow simultaneously from that moment. Thus all these

elements would work together at once for the oral performer to generate the spoken words.

This performance matrix approach to the ancient rhetorical schema shows us how readily transferable the lessons of ancient rhetoric might be to the context of the modern student of composition envisioned by Knoblauch and Brannon. I believe that James Britton's concept of "shaping at the point of utterance" effectively captures the potential connection between the ancient oral performance and the composition process in today's classroom (Freedman and Pringle, pp. 61-65). Britton's suggests an ongoing interaction between the individual engaged in the composing process and the emergent text being composed. The composing process is informed by the individual's continued awareness of the text evolving at "the point of utterance." Likewise, the ancient rhetor, the rhapsodic speaker, would much more literally be working at "the point of utterance," using the style of expression as a key to both memory and invention, using the shape of arrangement as a guide to delivery, etc. This kind of "performance matrix" could be used as a generative rhetoric for teaching written as well as oral composition, and might suit us quite well in this age of what Ong calls "secondary orality" (*Orality and Literacy*, p. 136). If we can recreate this spirit of ancient oral performance, compensating for textbook linearity, we can begin to use ancient rhetoric with genuine effectiveness in the teaching of composition.

But we must also try to understand how the "classicizing" process

evolved over time to deprive us of this approach, and how the intervention of new media, in the Renaissance and the twentieth century, has occasionally disrupted that classicizing tendency, allowing for a revival of performative rhetoric.

We begin to see "classicizing" with technical handbooks of fifth-century Greece, and with Isocrates (436 - 338 B.C.), the first rhetorician to write his speeches rather than deliver them orally (Kennedy, 31-35). Later, the Roman rhetoricians continued, amplified, and "institutionalized" the practice and theory of the Greek rhetorical tradition. In a different sense than usually presented, Cicero and Quintilian were truly amongst the first and greatest "classical" rhetoricians because they were amongst the first great "classicizers" of the ancient tradition for institutional purposes. They helped establish the central themes of rhetorical education that were echoed in later periods, and both make extensive claims for the cultural or moral authority of the "orator." Particularly in Cicero's *De oratore*, we find that the Orator becomes the ultimate culture hero.[4]

It was from Cicero in particular, along with Quintilian and some others, that the Renaissance sought to re-establish rhetoric at the center of cultural activity (cf. James Murphy's *Renaissance Eloquence*). Throughout the medieval period, it had been dialectic rather than rhetoric that was the focus of intellectual pursuit, but the Renaissance reversed that trend in its rejection of scholasticism and its renewed interest in "eloquence" (Kristeller, in Murphy, p. 17). As Walter Ong has

also pointed out, it was during the same period that printing developed as a major force in Western culture that the renewed interest in the art of rhetoric developed as well. And this interest was not merely in rhetoric as a utilitarian vehicle for communication and expression, but in the performative aspect of rhetoric as central to the creation of knowledge in a cultural context.

Just as in the ancient Greek period, Renaissance rhetoric flourished at a time when two distinctive media complicated the culture's awareness of language and communication (cf. Ong, Rhetoric, Romance, and Technology, chapters 2 & 3). The manuscript or "chirographic" culture, that had existed prior to printing, held writing to be a highly specialized and unusual activity pursued by a limited class of people, while most individuals remained illiterate (or, perhaps, pre-literate). But with the advent of printing, this manuscript culture, with its intensely oral bent (what Ong calls "residual orality"), did not change suddenly. Rather, its assumptions about language and culture, challenged by the new medium of print, re-asserted themselves with renewed vigor for a time. In the Renaissance cultural context, which valued both oral performance and intricately developed texts (many written for the first "mass medium"--print), we see the ancient art of rhetoric re-envisioned and revitalized, but not yet abandoned.

It was only later, after over a century of printing had begun to alter the cultural consciousness of Western Europe, that the values of ancient oral performance begin to ebb in favor of a more "textbook"

approach to the subject. This development was accelerated by the Ramistic movement which dissected the ancient performative matrix, relegating invention and arrangement to dialectic, dispensing with memory, and leaving a simple rhetorical dichotomy of "style" and "delivery" (cf. Ong, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue*). As Ong notes, it was the Ramistic tradition that became the foundation for western textbooks on the subject of rhetoric (*Ramus*, p. 9). This textbook tradition led eventually to a "rhetoric" of empty linguistic forms to be filled with any possible content--the very "tradition" which Knoblauch and Brannon have opposed. Eighteenth-century rhetoricians, influenced by enlightenment thought and its distaste for rhetorical performance, continued this process (Kennedy, pp. 220-41). Likewise, the elocutionary movement limited oral performance to a series of prescribed oratorical forms and/or theatrical gestures, moving even further from the original spirit of ancient rhetoric (Kennedy, 228-29).

But we live once more in a culture complicated by the interaction of various distinctive media, a culture Ong has described with the term "secondary orality" (*Orality and Literacy*, p. 136). Unlike the primary oral culture, which has no alternative to the spoken word, the secondary orality of our culture can project the spoken word through the ether, while often combining that word with images and texts in hitherto unimagined ways. Likewise, the nature of *text* itself is altered by the dynamic features of the computer (such as the one on which I now

compose this sentence), so that *text*, once frozen in time and space and its own linearity, now becomes ever more dynamic, indeterminate, and unpredictably mobile. In this context, we may well be ready for a revival and re-envisioning of ancient rhetoric, not as another chart or list in a textbook of classifications, but as a performative art that is oral, textual, and visual at once, a rhetorical moment which comes into being in time, but whose multi-media recording gives it the permanence of textuality. The reconsiderations that I suggested earlier are merely a beginning, and their potential applications for composition pedagogy will need to be explored in much greater depth. But in this world of rap singers and sound bytes, of music video and performance art, it may well be that we need to re-examine the most ancient "rhetorical performers" if we are to appreciate fully the complex rhetorical art and craft of our own richly textured discourse.

Notes

[1] The approach that I am taking in this paper parallels the work of Kathleen Welch in *The Contemporary Reception of Classical Rhetoric*. When I originally conceived of this paper, I had been unfamiliar with this book by Prof. Welch. Obviously, it provides a much more thorough coverage of contemporary views of "classical" rhetoric than I am able to present in a brief paper. For example, one of many issues which I do not have the opportunity to address is the concept of *kairos*. Those interested in the overall subject of contemporary views of classical rhetoric would do well to read Welch.

[2] Along with those works cited here, also see Havelock's *Preface to Plato* (1963), and Ong's *Interfaces of the Word* (1977).

[3] I would like to use the term "inter-mediacy" for this state of rhetorical tension and self-consciousness, produced when distinct media compete for dominance in a culture. Such conditions also exist in the European Renaissance, and in the twentieth century "media revolution." In large part, my development of this concept is rooted in Ong's theories about the relationship between language, media, and consciousness.

[4] In Chapter 3 of my dissertation, *Inventions for Voice: Humanist Rhetoric and the Experiments of Elizabethan Prose Fiction*, I discuss the "orator hero" at length.

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